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THE CHURCH OF CUBA

AN OUTLINE FROM THE EARLIEST PERIOD TO THE CAPTURE OF HAVANA BY THE ENGLISH (1492-1762)¹

Cuba has the honor of being one of the first countries of the New World colonized by Europeans, and of having sent from its shores the intrepid men who began the conquest of North America. As in many of its localities, the aboriginal name of the island has survived both *Juana* and *Fernandina*; and though a mere remnant of the aboriginal population exists today near Cape Maysi, the name of a vanished race is indelibly stamped upon the face of Cuba.

In 1492, the eyes of the white men first fell upon the great Antilla, the largest of the Antilles, when Columbus, leaving the Bahamas, was pursuing the course of his first voyage which was to end at the Island of Hayti, named by him Isabela. Sixteen more years were to pass before it became thoroughly established that Cuba was an island, when Sebastian de Ocampo circumnavigated it, and three more were to elapse, before the death-knell of the Indian was to sound. Diego Columbus, son of the great Admiral, was then at the head of Spain's colonies in the West Indies. From Santo Domingo, the cradle of Spanish colonization in the West, Diego Velasquez went in 1511 with three hundred of his countrymen to extend the conquests of Castile and Leon. The expedition disembarked in the harbor of Palmas near Cape Maysi. The great Dominican, Bartolomé de las Casas, then not yet a member of the

¹The sources of the ecclesiastical history of Cuba are much scattered, and there is hardly any single work which can be mentioned as a special reference. They must be sought for here, there and everywhere. The following, however, may be consulted: *Historia Ecclesiastica* of GIL GONZALEZ DAVILA; MOREL Y SANTA CRUZ, *Historia de la Isla y Catedral de Cuba*, MS. in the Biblioteca Nacional of Havana; ABRATE in the *Reports of the Sociedad Patriótica*; the *Works* of BACHILLER Y MORALES; the *Bibliografía Cubana* of CARLOS TRELLES; pamphlets and manuscripts in the *Biblioteca Nacional* of Havana; other MSS. in the valuable library of Señor Augusto Escoto of Matanzas; *Sources of the Ecclesiastical History of Spanish America*, by CHARLES WARREN CURRIER in *Reports of International Congress of Americanists*, London, 1912; *Sources of Ecclesiastical History of Cuba* by the same, (Manuscript to be read before the International Congress of Americanists at Washington, 1915).

Order of St. Dominic, went with the conquistadores. He was already a friend of the Indian and such he was to remain to the end of his life. In his little book, *The Destruction of the Indies*, he has given us a harrowing account of what he saw and heard among the doomed race on that island, and whatever allowance be made for the exaggeration to which he was prone, enough may be deducted to excite abhorrence on the one hand for the deeds of blood related therein, and pity on the other for the unfortunate Hatuey and his vanishing race. Las Casas had enough opportunities to gather material for his subsequent histories; for, with Panfilo de Narvaez, he traveled from east to west through the greater part of the island as far as the province of Havana in order to reconnoitre the country and to pacify the inhabitants. In 1512, Velasquez founded the town of Asuncion de Baracoa, the oldest settlement in Cuba, and two years later the foundations were laid of Trinidad, San Salvador, Santiago de Cuba, San Salvador de Bayamo and Santa Maria del Puerto Principe. On July 25th, the Feast of St. Christopher, in 1515, the settlement of San Cristobal de la Habana was begun some distance from the site where the capital of the island is situated today. The Feast of the Patron Saint of Havana, by permission of the Holy See, is celebrated on November 16, since July 25 is also the feast-day of St. James the Apostle.

Unfortunately for the history of the first period of Cuban colonization, the fact must be recorded that the earliest archives of the island have perished. The dampness of the climate, insects, and the incursions of buccaneers were so many deadly agencies that have contributed toward the annihilation of these precious documents. The archives of Havana were destroyed in 1538 in a conflagration caused by a French buccaneer. It may be taken for granted that in those days missionaries, mostly Friars, found their way into various parts of the island, as the Spanish expeditions were always accompanied by priests; and the conversion of the natives, it must be said to their credit, was always uppermost in the mind of the sovereigns of Castile. Bishoprics too were invariably founded, as soon as the settlement of a country began. The Spaniards had not been in Cuba eight years, when a bull of Leo X, in 1518, established the diocese of Baracoa under the title of the Assumption. There seems to be some controversy about the first Bishop of Cuba, but it appears probable that the honor belongs to Fray Juan Garces

of the Order of St. Dominic. Elected to Baracoa, he never saw Cuba, as he was transferred to the See of Cozumel. No bishop ever resided in Baracoa, for the see was suppressed by Adrian VI in 1522, the year in which Velasquez, the first colonizer of Cuba, died. When excavations were made in 1810 for the new Cathedral of Santiago, the stone covering his mortal remains with his epitaph was found seven and a half feet below the pavement. In 1523, the See of Santiago was established with the Fleming, John de Witte, as its first Bishop. He was most likely a Dominican. This Bishop did not reach his diocese, which he governed by a vicar, and he resigned in 1527. Dying in 1540 in the city of Bruges, he was buried there in the Dominican convent, with an epitaph recording the fact that after being Bishop of Cuba, he was Arch-almoner and confessor of Eleonora, Queen of France.

De Witte was succeeded by the Dominican Friar, Bernardo de Meza, whose consecration took place in 1536. He arrived in his diocese two years later. In the meantime the colonization of Florida had been begun and a bishop had been appointed to that region in 1527 in the person of the Franciscan, Juan Suarez, who never took possession of his see, owing to the many difficulties that accompanied the conquest. In consequence of this, Florida was annexed to the spiritual jurisdiction of Santiago, and remained subject to it until the latter part of the eighteenth century, when the colony was transferred to England. The Island of Jamaica also formed part of the diocese of Santiago, whose Bishop remained suffragan to the Archbishop of Santo Domingo, until towards the end of the eighteenth century when the Bishop of Santiago became the Metropolitan of Cuba. Among the early Bishops of Santiago in the sixteenth century we find recorded the names of Juan Flandes, the Dominican; Miguel Ramirez de Salamanca; the Carthusian, Diego de Sarmiento; Fernando de Urango, and Bernardino de Villalpando y Talavera. The last named was translated to Guatemala in 1564. Juan del Castillo, who was Bishop in 1568, had the intention of visiting the island of Jamaica in obedience to the decrees of the Council of Trent; but he was forced to desist for want of the necessary funds which he was unable to obtain from the officers of the crown in the island. The difficulties of Episcopal visitation in Cuba were enormous in those days, when one reflects that even in recent times there have been parishes in the island that had not known an

episcopal visitation for eighteen, or even thirty years. Juan del Castillo seems to have resigned after the year 1571. His successors were the Franciscan, Diaz Salcedo, another Franciscan, Bartolomé de la Plaza, and the Dominican, Juan de las Cabezas, whom we find there in 1602, and who was translated later to Guatemala. His successor, Armendariz, seems, from all accounts, to have been a man of strong and almost military character. He passed from the see of Cuba to that of Michoacan, and he was followed at Santiago by the Augustinian Friar, Gregorio de Alarcon. In 1625, Leonel de Cervantes, a native of Mexico, was transferred from the see of Santa Marta to that of Cuba.

In the seventeenth century, owing to the repeated incursions of buccaneers, and for other reasons, the Bishops of Santiago took up their abode in the growing metropolis of Havana, while their Chapter remained at the Cathedral in Santiago. This state of affairs, abnormal yet not exactly uncanonical, lasted until the division of the diocese, when the see of Havana was erected at the close of the eighteenth century. Bishop Geronimo de Lara, of the order of La Merced, who succeeded Leonel de Cervantes, died at Havana in 1644. He was buried in the principal parish church, dedicated to St. Christopher, which had been begun in 1550, the original church having been burned in the conflagration of 1538. Of the tomb of this Bishop no trace remains. His successor was Martin de Zelaya Ocarriz, who was succeeded by Nicholas de la Torre. The latter died in Havana and his mortal remains reposed in the Church of the Candelaria at Guanabacoa, opposite Havana, but there is nothing to show where they may have been laid. In 1656 we find as Bishop, Juan de Montiel, and two years later, Pedro de Reyna Maldonado, a native of Lima in Peru who is known as the author of a work entitled *The Perfect Prelate*. Maldonado died in Havana without being consecrated, and his successor, Juan de Santo Matia Saens de Manosca, was translated to the see of Guatemala. Francisco Bernardo Alonso de los Rios, a Trinitarian, was translated to the see of Ciudad Rodrigo, becoming later Archbishop of Granada. Another Bishop-author of Cuba was Gabriel Diaz Vara Calderon, who published a work on the *Grandeur and Marvels of Rome*. He died in Havana, and like so many of his predecessors, he lies in an unknown tomb.

Up to this time, no Synod had ever been held in the Island of

Cuba, and the decrees of the Provincial Council of Santo Domingo, convened in 1622, were the only synodal statutes which governed the Island. On March 4, 1673, the King of Spain ordered the Bishop Vara Calderon to convene a Synod, but the death of the Bishop the following year prevented the execution of the decree. The honor of holding the first Synod in the Island was reserved to his successor, Juan Garcia de Palacios, who was taken from Puebla de los Angeles in Mexico. The Synod met in June, 1684, with the approbation of the king, by whose permission the statutes were published in Spanish. Unfortunately nothing is said in the book of the *Acta Synodi* besides the statutes, and it is regrettable that the names of those present are not recorded. These statutes were reprinted in Havana in 1841 by Bishop Juan José Diaz de Espada y Landa. This is the edition I have utilized. This book, now very rare, belongs to the collection of my friend Señor Escoto of Matanzas who, possibly, possesses the best collection of works on Cuba to be found anywhere outside of the Biblioteca Nacional of Havana. These statutes, apart from their religious and canonical importance, are most valuable to the historian for the knowledge they impart of the religious condition of Cuba toward the close of the seventeenth century. Unlike the present day, it appears that the practice of paschal communion was at that time general in the island. The parish priests were obliged to take a census of their flock year by year, and note those that received the Sacraments by certificates given to each one. These certificates were to be delivered to the Bishop. Those who failed to comply with their Easter duty were excommunicated and denounced. This law was binding throughout the diocese, including Florida and Jamaica. It is now quite a general custom to celebrate marriage in private houses with the permission of the Bishop. The custom existed then; but the Synod forbade it, although it is evident that permission was sometimes granted. Bull-fights were forbidden on Sundays and festival days. The faithful, including slaves, were obliged to pay tithes and first fruits for the support of religion, a custom which has since fallen completely into desuetude. Another change in religious customs is observed in the lesser frequency of the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament which was then permitted only within the Octave of Corpus Christi and on some few other days of the year. This was in harmony with the general custom then prevailing and with several decrees of the Sovereign Pontiffs.

The population of the island outside of the towns is today greatly scattered, the majority living in their thatched huts or bohios where they devote themselves to the cultivation of the land. At a period when the population was smaller, when towns and parishes were few, this isolation was still more marked. It was consequently, as it still is, very difficult for a considerable portion of the people to assist at the service of the church. To meet the spiritual needs of the rural population, the Synod decreed that persons living from one to three leagues away from the place where Mass was said, should assist every two weeks. The obligation diminished as the distance increased: thus, one living eight or ten leagues away might comply with his duty once a month; twenty leagues, every two months; thirty leagues, every three months; while those residing sixty or seventy leagues away were required to assist at Mass only once a year. The obligation of fasting and abstinence was far more stringent then than it is now. All were obliged to fast in Lent, on the Ember days, and on a large number of vigils in the year. Moreover, all Fridays and Saturdays were days of abstinence. *Lactinia*, or milk, eggs, butter and so forth, were permitted only by dispensation in virtue of the Bull of the Cruzada. Masters were, moreover, obliged to see to it that their slaves could observe the abstinence of the Church. Today there is very little fasting or abstinence in Cuba and throughout Latin America generally. Dispensations have followed dispensations so uniformly, that the law as it stood, and as it stands in many countries, has become well-nigh obsolete. In 1788, Pius VI dispensed from the Saturday abstinence throughout the year, with the exception of the Saturdays in Lent, the Ember Days and the vigils. Pius VII in 1801 granted the Bishops the faculty to dispense from the abstinence of flesh meat on all days except Ash Wednesday, the Fridays in Lent, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday of Holy Week besides several vigils. This indulgent, at first limited to six years, was extended at various times. At present there are few days of fasting and abstinence left in Latin America, the dispensations granted to the Indian and colored population being even greater than those conceded to the whites.

The Synod of 1684 gives favorable testimony to the conduct of the ecclesiastics who are said "by the grace of God to live with all modesty interiorly and exteriorly." To remove all suspicion from them, they were forbidden under penalty of excommunication to

have any woman in their house, except a near relative, such as mother, sister, or cousin. Provision was made for the support of the priest, but the taxes imposed upon the faithful for marriages and interments were quite moderate. In those days the offering for Baptism was to be entirely voluntary on the part of the people. A very humane enactment of the Synod was that forbidding the separation of husband and wife in a sale of slaves. Masters were also strictly prohibited from putting obstacles in the way of the marriage of their slaves.

In those days there were very few parishes in the island, although the number of priests appears to have been comparatively large. In the city of Havana there were only two parishes, namely S. Cristobal and Espiritu Santo, besides the Eremita church, the Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje, which in 1693 became an auxiliary parish.

Of convents in Havana we find that of the Dominicans, with its church of S. Juan Letran, the Franciscans, the Augustinians, and a hospitium of Mercedarians who, much later, established a monastery, and built the Church of La Merced. The Oratorians of St. Philip Neri had also an establishment. Among convents of nuns, there existed none but that of Santa Clara which had been founded in 1644. There were two hospitals, that of San Juan de Dios, the oldest in Havana, and the hospital of San Francisco de Paula for women, founded about 1665.

The Synod of 1684 was held at Havana, and the Bishop died not long afterwards in Santiago de Cuba. His successor, Baltazar de Figueroa y Guiena, a monk of the Cistercian Monastery of St. Basil in Valparaiso, was consecrated in Madrid, but he did not live to see Cuba, as he died at Cadiz while preparing for his voyage. The next Bishop was the celebrated Diego Evelino de Compostela, one of the greatest prelates Cuba has ever had. He governed the diocese from 1685 to 1704. A native of Compostela in Spain, at the age of fifteen he defended theses on the whole range of philosophy. He took his degree in this faculty in the University of Compostela in 1658, and completed his studies at the age of nineteen. In 1663 he became doctor of Theology, and the following year of Canon Law. Having filled the position of rector of the college of the Infantes at Toledo, and held chairs of Theology, Metaphysics and Sacred Scripture at Valladolid, he was consecrated Bishop of Cuba in 1685. Before departing for his distant field of labor, he was

named visitor of the convent of Royal Discalced at the court, and closed his visitation with a sermon delivered in presence of King Charles II and other royal personages, three cardinals, a patriarch, three archbishops, fourteen grandees and twenty-two court preachers. While still in the mother-country, he consecrated six Bishops and confirmed a number of persons. He has left the reputation of being a despiser of riches, a lover of the poor, and a man of great humility and zeal for the glory of God. His name is met with at every step in the history of Cuba at that period on account of the many foundations which owe their existence to him. To provide for the necessities of his people, he established at least sixteen rural parishes, among them being those of Macurijes and Guamutas in the present diocese of Matanzas. At the end of the seventeenth century, when the city of Matanzas was founded, Bishop Evelino laid the foundation of the parish church of San Carlos. The first two entries in the earliest baptismal record of San Carlos, Matanzas, are written by the hand of Bishop Evelino who, on the day on which he laid the corner-stone, baptized two negro slaves. The Church of the Angel in Havana also owes its origin to him, though the present edifice is of a much later date. He donated his own money for the purpose, and dedicated the Church in 1690. His foundation by predilection seems to have been that of the Discalced Carmelite nuns in Havana, established in 1700 by Sisters from Cartagena. It was in the church of this convent that he wished to be buried, and here he awaits the Resurrection, as his epitaph says, "among the lilies of Carmel and its virginal choirs." He departed this life on August 29, 1704, at the age of seventy-nine.

His successor was Geronimo de Valdes, who was at first Bishop of Porto Rico, and was translated to Cuba in 1706. At his death in 1729, he was buried in the parish church of Espiritu Santo. The following Bishop, Francisco de Izarregui, did not see Cuba, neither did his successor, Gaspar de Molina y Oviedo, an Augustinian, who was soon promoted to the See of Barcelona and afterwards became a cardinal. At a later period, more than one of his successors in the See of Santiago, on returning to Spain, was promoted to the Roman purple. Juan Lazo de la Vega y Cancino, a Franciscan, governed the diocese from 1732 to 1752. He was buried at Havana in the old Church of San Francisco.

The next and last Bishop before the British invasion, Pedro

Agostin Morel de Santa Cruz, was elected to the See of Santiago in 1753. A native of Santo Domingo, he had first held the See of Nicaragua, whence he was translated to Cuba. Bishop Morel had been Bishop of Cuba about nine years, when, after a memorable siege, and a heroic resistance on the part of the Spaniards, Havana was captured by the British under the Duke of Albemarle. The Bishop himself, owing to a disagreement with the conquerors, was transported to Florida. His captivity did not, however, last long, for early in the following year (1763), Havana was restored to Spain in exchange for Florida, and the Bishop returned to his See.

Bishop Morel has left us a manuscript on the *History of the Island and the Cathedral of Cuba*. Unfortunately it has not seen the light. It must be sought for among the manuscripts of the Biblioteca Nacional in Havana. When Bishop Morel became Bishop of Cuba, the Church had reached the summit of its prosperity, from a material, as well as from a spiritual standpoint. The Bishop enjoyed a rental of 27,000 pesos, and the Church in the island was, perhaps, one of the wealthiest in the world. Besides the two parish churches of San Cristobal and Espiritu Santo, and the auxiliary parish churches of Santo Cristo del Buen Viaje, on the Plaza del Cristo, and of the S. Angel Custodio, there were at least twenty-one churches and chapels in different parts of the city. The Jesuits had come to Cuba in 1721. Their beautiful college is now the seminary of the diocese, and the present cathedral was then their church. The present Jesuit College of Belen was at that time the hospital for convalescents in charge of the Bethlehemite Brothers. Besides the convent of Santa Clara, there existed that of Santa Catalina, founded from Santa Clara, and that of Santa Teresa. The University of St. Jerome had for some years been established in the Dominican monastery, in virtue of a Bull of Pope Innocent XIII, and the approbation of the King, which was obtained in 1728. These churches and institutions were served by a numerous clergy who were, as Arrate says, very respectable, and who undoubtedly possessed among them a number of eminent men.

It is hard to understand the decadence of religion that prevailed at a later date, and the laxity of the clergy that existed to the period of Independence. Bishop Martinez, exiled from Havana by the ultra Spanish element, writes in 1871 ² that religious indiffer-

² *Los Voluntarios de Cuba y El Obispo de la Habana.*

ence began to prevail precisely at the moment of the greatest prosperity of the island, when agriculture and the sugar industry had increased to a fabulous extent. More religious monuments have been left by its poverty than by its opulence. Although in point of architecture, Cuba has nothing to show in comparison with other colonies of Spain in America, it remains true that most of the churches of today, with the exception of some few, like the Angel in Havana, and San Pedro in Versalles de Matanzas, can trace their origin to the period that preceded the reign of the great sugar kings of the Pearl of the Antilles. The standard of the clergy, most of whom came from Spain, seems to have declined, and with this decline other causes contributing, such as the influence of the French Revolution and infidel literature, came the decline in religious fervor and in religious practice. One great obstacle to the perfect development of the Church in Cuba must not be overlooked, an obstacle that existed from the beginning, but that accentuated itself under the house of Austria and, probably still more, under Bourbon rule,—the interference of the State. The Church lacked freedom; she was shackled to the government, of whom the Bishops and priests were officials. Bishop Martinez is most emphatic on this point. He writes with a freedom that is startling. There was no Bishop in Cuba, he tells us, who did not live in constant martyrdom, or continually exposed to the danger of being exiled. "In consequence of false and anticanonical interpretations of the Bulls of the Sovereign Pontiffs regarding the patronage of the Kings of Spain over the churches of the West Indies, the secular power had assumed attributes which did not belong to it, thereby restricting the Bishop in the exercise of his spiritual jurisdiction, and subjecting him to the civil authority and even to the caprice of those exercising it." The Bishop had become a kind of honorary acolyte, who was to receive commands, and a toy of those insubordinate persons whom he might not correct. Thus it was, that many Bishops of the island were confronted by difficulties that amounted to persecution. How was it possible that Bishops could tolerate certain crying abuses that existed? This question arises spontaneously when one studies the history of the island. The answer is simply that their hands were tied. The fact, writes Bishop Martinez, that one had canonically deposed a priest from his benefice, cost him thirteen years of lawsuits, and most bitter sufferings, to the extent of his being cited

before a secular tribunal to answer for his action. As long as the civil authority invaded the rights of the Church, and undertook to govern the diocese, the position of a Bishop was an impossible one. The case is cited where the government undertook to annul the judgment pronounced by the Bishop, and to protect those who had been proven guilty by a canonical process. It is thus quite clear that a Bishop could not proceed against a disorderly ecclesiastic without exposing himself to the persecution that might be excited by the influences that such an ecclesiastic could exert.

This state of affairs has changed. Church and State are no longer united in Cuba, though other troubles are not wanting. These might be touched upon in other papers dealing with the subsequent history of the Cuban Church, although the time is not ripe for a history of ecclesiastical events following the Revolution.

CHARLES WARREN CURRIER.
